2013

The Road to the American Dream - Analysis of its Distortions through The Grapes of Wrath and Little Miss Sunshine

Autumn Murphy
University of Kentucky, autumn.murphy017@gmail.com

The Road to the American Dream

Analysis of its Distortions through

The Grapes of Wrath and ***Little Miss Sunshine***

Autumn Murphy

ENG 395

Professor Michael Carter

April 30, 2013

Introduction

In a radio speech in 1940, Franklin Delano Roosevelt remarked, "I have read a book recently. It is called *The Grapes of Wrath*. There are 500,000 Americans that live in the covers of that book." His point is clear; the author John Steinbeck writes a novel of vast importance for his era and today, a work that portrays reality through fiction. *The Grapes of Wrath* epitomizes the impact that literature can have in changing the perspectives and reaching a national level. Like a leader or president, books mobilize people's thoughts and often provoke them into action.

With *The Grapes of Wrath*, that provocation to act revolves around helping poverty-stricken migrants from the Dust Bowl. However, in the decades following, *The Grapes of Wrath*'s message continues to be relevant. A stirring example is a twenty-first century film which adapts Steinbeck's book. In the film *Little Miss Sunshine*, the struggles found in *The Grapes of Wrath* appear transposed to an examination of contemporary struggles. The film provides key comparisons on which to base the two works' resemblance to each other, and through these junctures, the works underscore a salient, enduring theme. As both artistic works confirm through their resolutions, the idea of the American Dream has been distorted. Though each works' characters hold idealized visions for the future, the novel and film destroy these figments of reality. Steinbeck and Arndt argue that a true American Dream does not live and breathe based on winning or losing. Through their works, they make congruent conclusions that resilience against adversity and loyalty to family more accurately describe what the American Dream should be.

To demonstrate their arguments, the following paper will first explain the historical contexts of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. In exploring these contexts, one will comprehend more fully the purpose and significance of these works. Next, the paper will express

the disparate modes of representation, those being literary journalism and parody, respectively. From learning about their modes of representation, one will appreciate these works' separate exigencies more profoundly. With both the historical and literary contexts established, the paper will progress to establish the bases of comparison of these two works; namely, the comparison will be reached through similar characterization of the journey clans, intersecting plot points, and a shared conclusive element. After establishing the congruities, the paper will examine the significance of this comparison in light of current social, political, and economic dilemmas. The paper will conclude that the American Dream is based on a polarized definition of success or failure, which distorts the perceptions of the populace.

In the current moment, misshapen perspectives have drastically affected social, political, and economic discussions. In light of the 2008 economic recession and recovery, the conclusions made in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine* provide adjustments to correct the perceptual distortions. The paper will explore the role of individualism in the recession, correlating that tendency to a failure for the nation. Despite the common rhetoric that collectivism culminates in socialism, the alignment toward a more collective ethos will prove an effective tool to employ in the future. With respect to the 2008 political campaigns, the paper will identify compelling evidence that collectivist policies prove more effective in winning an election. Barack Obama's message reached and supported the national family instead of catering to isolated groups wanting success only for themselves. Lastly, when looking at post-collegiate unemployment, the paper will demonstrate the positive, family-affirming results of this problem. Despite the struggles and bitterness unemployment can cause, the loyalty to one's family during the process educes victory of another kind. For each issue of the current moment, the paper will support a new approach, highlighting the ways in which *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss*

Sunshine can relate to the issues. Each issue stakes a winner and a loser, but seeing the effects of resilience and loyalty in these situations restructures the definition of success. The true American Dream, as shown by *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, rises above success defined by winning to a more cohesive reality, based on human capabilities and connections.

Historical Context

The ecological situation that created the crisis of the Great Plains took root long before the Joad family lost their farm. In fact, the post-World War I demand for wheat is considered a primary cause of the Dust Bowl. As experts from the National Academy of Sciences suggest, the roots of the problem lay in the previous decade:

> During the 1920s, agriculture in the United States expanded into the central Great Plains. Much of the original, drought-resistant prairie grass was replaced with drought-sensitive wheat. With no drought plan and few erosion-control measures in place, this led to large-scale crop failures at the initiation of the drought, leaving fields devegetated and barren, exposing easily eroded soil to the winds. This was the source of the major dust storms and atmospheric dust loading of the period on a level unprecedented in the historical record. (Cook 4997)

The previous quotation explains that despite the AAA's efforts to curb the drought's deterioration of the Great Plains, the neglectful policies of the 1920s caused irreparable damage. Following World War I, demand for American-grown wheat enlarged to compensate for withered agricultural industries in Europe. Wheat farming moved into areas like the Joads' state of Oklahoma, the conditions of which did not suffice for wheat production; consequently, the crop stripped the land of valuable nutrients and resources. When the fields were left fallow in an

attempt to replenish the nutrients, the soil could not sustain ground cover to combat the winds. Consequently, the winds swept away the vital topsoil, weakening future vegetation or inhibiting crops from growing at all. Men and women, represented by Pa and Ma Joad, watched their livelihoods drift away on the wind, but they did not have the means to stop it. The proceeding years after the initial dust storms proved some of the worst crop seasons in recorded history. What occurred after the Dust Bowl only worsened the problems of the Great Depression; less food was available to the poverty-stricken globe, and the resources of the world's breadbasket were severely depleted. Thus, the Dust Bowl held disastrous consequences for the farmers and consumers alike.

While the Great Plains farmers struggled to subsist, private relief organizations quarreled over who held responsibility for the tragic circumstances. The Red Cross in particular maintained an adamant stance against aid to farmers based on a technicality in their charter. According to Michele Landis, who specializes in the history of the American welfare state, the Red Cross "initially refused to relieve either the unemployed or the drought-stricken farmers, citing its charter authorizing relief for 'pestilence, famine, fire, floods, and other national calamities'" (Landis 275). The main importance of the Red Cross' refusal is that the drought was not perceived as a national policy failure but as an individual failure of the farmers. This idea arises in *The Grapes of Wrath* when the tractor drivers, knocking down the tenant farmers' homes, exclude themselves, the banks, and the large corporations from any kind of blame (Steinbeck 38). Continued resistance to the farmers' plight created a stigma that those who fell victim to the drought were unsuccessful and not worthy of aid. The opinion persisted that "bad weather" and "bad credit" caused the disenfranchisement of the Great Plains farmers (Landis 258). Though the

Dust Bowl's effects rippled monstrously in the national sphere, the Red Cross refused to aid those directly suffering from the crisis.

The federal government held similar reservations and made elusory statements when asked by the Okies to help. Justice Warren of the Supreme Court of the United States claimed that the acute scope of the drought, compared with the size of the nation, made the crisis inconsequential in terms of government spending. As Warren stated, "how do these appropriations for purely local relief come within the scope of the distinction insisted upon by Alexander Hamilton between National, general, public and local, individual benefit?" (Landis 280). Thus, Warren concluded that the states affected held the responsibility for rehabilitating the areas. His reference to Hamilton's distinction originated in the argument for a strict General Welfare Cause; for Warren and Hamilton, national aid did not fit regional need. From the perspective of the federal government, the localized crisis of the Dust Bowl was seen as negligible to the general welfare. Displaced migrant families like the Joads did not receive federal aid, and as a result, they spiraled further into destitution.

When establishing the comparison between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, it is critical to note that while the historical contexts differ, several elements remain unchanged. Both the Joads and the Hoovers live during times of familial and economic turbulence. In light of these points, the two works can be related—the objects, professions, pastimes, etc. have altered, but the tone of the social and economic environments of both works align.

The tone of *Little Miss Sunshine* suggests emphatically that traditional familial structure no longer applies. In an opinion piece published on May 18, 2001 in *The New York Times*, the data indicates that the model for the "normal family" has fundamentally changed:

> Now, for the first time, fewer than a quarter of the households in this country are made up of nuclear families -- 23.5 percent to be exact, down from 25.6 percent in 1990 and 45 percent in 1960. Also, for the first time, the number of people living alone is greater than the number of nuclear families. ("The Changing American Family")

The new data supported in this piece demonstrates that the idea of the "nuclear family" no longer applies to the majority. The rise of divorce rates, of women in the workforce, and of single-parent households has created a more complex familial composition. When looking at *Little Miss Sunshine*, Dwayne is a perfect example of the broken nuclear family model. Though their family is composed of a father, mother, and two children, they are only half-siblings because of divorce and re-marriage. In addition to the idea of more complex family relationships, a recent article from *The New York Times* conveys a gradual trend toward multi-generational homes. As Penelope Green writes about a growing number of households composing of "boomer couples with boomerang children and aging parents, an increasingly multiethnic population with a tradition of housing three generations under one roof" (Green). A critical component of this trend proves the growing costs of nursing homes. In a decade and a half marked with economic uncertainty, incorporating multiple generations contains unforeseen perks—childcare, as Green points out. *Little Miss Sunshine* follows with this trend with the inclusion of Grandpa; he resides permanently in the basement of his son's house. In both examples, the conditions of the Hoover household adequately conform to the contextual standards, providing an authentic composition of characters. The Hoovers project a family with imperfection and limitations, but these two factors grant the story more plausibility than an alternative.

Like the social imperfections, the Hoovers' financial situation proves authentic to the economic context of this period. The economy after the new millennium regressed from the prosperity of the 1990s. Another *New York Times* article by Richard Stevenson, entitled "Treasury Chief Sees an Economic Brightening," states that The National Bureau of Economic Research believed a recession had begun in March 2001 as a result of Y2K problem (Stevenson). Compounded with the new millennium, the September 11th attacks weakened state of the economy to create a downturn. Unfortunately, the effects of that recession were felt longer than the National Bureau of Economic Research projected; Stevenson asserts that private economists predicted the recession was to endure into 2002 and possibly 2003 (Stevenson). The effects for the populace included increased gasoline prices, increased food prices, and slowed job growth. For lower-middle class families like the Hoovers, small businesses posed the risk of bankruptcy due to low interest and cautious investment. The failed business model fomented in *Little Miss Sunshine* adequately describes the period because small businesses did not come with the relative financial stability of the 1990s. In creating the failing small business model, the screenwriter Michael Arndt appeals to an audience that has endured recessional restrictions on the economic market.

An additional layer of the historical context involves both works' reception from critics and audiences. By acknowledging the positive press and public opinion, the authority of both works emerges. They influenced their respective genres immensely, and the responses indicate their influence on popular thought.

Because the novel centers on migrants from Oklahoma, knowing the critical reception in Oklahoma provides insight on the native population's perspective. The most reliable source for gathering these thoughts proves to be the local newspapers. In an article called "The Reception

of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Oklahoma," Martin Staples Shockley explains the shocking reactions of Oklahoma natives upon the book's release. He provides an array of reporters' critiques, including "vile language" by one, "factual inaccuracies" by another, and "communistic propaganda" by a third (Shockley 351). However, the amount of purchasing showed that the common folk were eager to participate in advocating for the Okies' cause. Shockley recalls in his review that "Mr. Hollis Russell of Stevenson's Bookstore in Oklahoma City told me, 'People who looked as though they had never read a book in their lives came in to buy it'" (Shockley 352). Shockley review is a testament to the public's optimism and respect for the cause. Though reasonably the novel did not assert a pluralistic view of Oklahoma, the residents of Oklahoma stepped forward in alarming numbers to show solidarity with those their state had left desperately underserved. In a small way, the advocacy of the Oklahoma people, through buying Steinbeck's book, contributed to the changing opinions people held about the impoverished farming class. The Oklahoma population showed their support for migrants that they had abandoned, opening themselves up to the Joads—and the farmers by extension.

Outside of Oklahoma, Steinbeck's work was similarly met with critical praise. In a review hosted by The University of Northern Iowa, entitled "In the Great Tradition," Charles Angoff clarifies that while Steinbeck has earned his place in Hell among prolific American writers, he also has boosted himself to the standard of Melville, Hawthorne, and Norris (Angoff 387). His reason include the book having "all the earmarks of something momentous, monumental, and memorable: universal compassion, a sensuousness so honestly and recklessly tender" (387). What he indicates here is the unmistakable nobility of the novel's cause; Steinbeck wrote to liberate a stigmatized class from the perception of being worthless or peripheral. The monumental quality is invoked by the Joads' universality in that their plight was

not of their cause, but unfortunately, it was placed on their backs to carry. Steinbeck creates a novel that speaks beyond its subject to the vulnerability that each of us possesses against anonymous, predatory individualism. Though the concept may seem paradoxical, it is that anonymous individualism that Steinbeck combats in *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, Angoff's review demonstrates that Angoff and many others uphold that Steinbeck's narrative places a face on the neglected Okies. Angoff's praise confirms that throughout the Midwest and the country, Steinbeck's novel raised compassion and awareness for the migrants of the Dust Bowl catastrophe.

Despite the middle-class hardships underscored in *Little Miss Sunshine*, the film received excellent reviews from critics. In a film review by Jim Emerson, the idea of winners and losers arises as a central theme; he illustrates that "there's a form, a brochure, a procedure, a job title, a diet, a step-by-step program, a career path, a prize, a retirement community, to quantify, sort, categorize and process every human emotion or desire" (Emerson). *Little Miss Sunshine* posits that behind every choice is a clear, logical right decision. Farcically, the film implies that success can be achieved simply and quickly, but as the obstacles along the journey symbolically suggest, success fights back. The main critical determination from Emerson and his contemporaries remains that *Little Miss Sunshine* questions the meaning of success in the Hoovers' ridiculous interstate journey. As Emerson declares, *Little Miss Sunshine* is emphatically "a movie about dreams—and illusions."

Beginning with the Sundance Film Festival, *Little Miss Sunshine* accomplished many dreams of its production crew. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences found several members of the operation worthy of praise. In an uncommon occurrence for independent films, *Little Miss Sunshine* was nominated for Best Picture. Michael Arndt and Alan Arkin received

Oscars for Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor, respectively. In several award competitions, Michael Arndt received similar awards, based on his exemplary screenplay. Popular reception resembled that of the film industry, boasting top-ten numbers at the box office for a solid eight weeks ("Box Office Summary…"). Both the awards and box office recognition confirm *Little Miss Sunshine's* credibility as a film. As a recipient of the most prestigious film award, Michael Arndt's screenplay exudes technical and literary prominence. Additionally, *Little Miss Sunshine's* status as an independent film enables its success; with no overhead censorship or supervision, the film's direction diverges from the norm of Hollywood movies. Whereas studio films adhere to profit and approval, independent films operate with a minimal budget and maximized creativity. The directors and screenwriter did not hold reservations about the content, which contrasts the caution that pervades studio-controlled cinema. While relating an important message within the film, *Little Miss Sunshine* also leaves an encouraging legacy for independent film-making. Thus, the film is significant to the independent film industry because it provides an authoritative example of independent-film quality.

Different Modes of Representation

The genre that best categorizes *The Grapes of Wrath* is that of literary journalism. Though it is a work of fiction—defined by author-created characters, settings, and interactions—the story expands beyond the world of fiction to encapsulate a contemporaneous dilemma. The genre of literary journalism possesses a unique composition style, one that is vital to understand in order to grasp the motivation and intensity with which Steinbeck wrote. The style portrays that Steinbeck's intention was not to sell copies at a bookstore, but rather his purpose lay in making the public aware of a relatively obscure issue. What typically defines authors of literary

journalism is an ardent compassion for the subject matter; in Steinbeck's novel, the Okies are the subject, and like any journalist, Steinbeck traveled to the reality of the story first. In a collection of journal entries, entitled *Working Days*, Steinbeck conveys his writing process and the importance of *The Grapes of Wrath.* In one entry, he explains literary journalism succinctly, "But my people must be more than people. They must be an over-essence of people" (Steinbeck, *Working Days,* 39). The idea of overstating the characters remains the heart of literary journalism, and its blood remains an expansion of the characters beyond the book and into the realistic dimensions of the 1930s.

As a style of writing, literary journalism began in the early twentieth century. Throughout its evolution, the genre has maintained its position—to confront popular assumptions with a more accurate analysis of humanity. A novel of literary journalism promulgates a fictional narrative about an issue; while that narrative progresses, the work evaluates the situation and discusses its silenced struggles. In a critique of the genre, *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century,* literary critic William Howarth discusses literary journalism's impact on the exposition of the Okies' struggle. He describes, "Frustrated by poor coverage in local newspapers, officials at the [Farm Security Administration] asked [Steinbeck] to write some reports for national circulation. He saw this task as a humanitarian mission" (Howarth 64). *Their Blood is Strong* was one of the reports he created, and in doing so, the project sparked his interest in creating a documentary-style novel to incur heightened attention to the issue. In writing the novel, Steinbeck traveled along Route 66, writing the story along the main road of migrant deliverance. His journey aligned with that of the Oklahoma migrants (Howarth 64), and this experience adhered Steinbeck further to advocating on their behalf. The result proved to be a novel of empathy, written to effect change for those victimized by nature and their fellow man.

The people that the Joads represented to Steinbeck were stock of the earth, ripped apart by natural disaster and weakened by the manipulation of California landowners. In his experience with the refugees from Oklahoma and the Great Plains, Steinbeck learned of the inscrutable poverty firsthand. In a posthumous collection, entitled *A Life in Letters,* Steinbeck describes a disturbing account:

> I must go over into the interior valleys. There are about five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line and yelling for a balanced budget. […]I've tied into the thing from the first and I must get down there and see it and see if I can't do something to help knock these murderers on the heads. (Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters* 158)

While thousands suffer extreme hunger, those with the power to save them remain adamant to achieving a "balanced budget". Steinbeck's letter entails not only the severity of the conditions, but also the apathy with which corporations responded. The juxtaposition of need and apathy is addressed directly in *The Grapes of Wrath*, affirming the influence of realistic experience on his work. The occurrence described above relates directly to literary journalism; in his novel, the fictional characters undergo the hardships, which he witnessed people suffering through in California. The landowners' control on resources, jobs, and money resembled to him a fascist dictatorship; the Okies toiled for a meager subsistence with no hope for improvement. Because of that reality, Steinbeck expressed to the American public the murderous actions the landowners were committing. He follows the previous statement with another harsh truth, "the crops of any part of this state could not be harvested without these outsiders" (Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters*

158). This quotation reveals that growers and bankers exploited the Okies intentionally in addition to their apathetic reactions to their suffering. While the indifference to the refugees' lives disturbed Steinbeck, the exploitation of their work infuriated him into action. He believed the Okies' refugee status lay at the center of a corrupt and profitable scheme to underfund their work because another worker could just pop up to fill the vacancy. In this resolve, Steinbeck wrote about the humanity of the migrants to convey their indispensible worth.

Though *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine* utilize dissimilar modes of representation, both works engage their respective modes in order to enlighten their audiences about a lifestyle the characters of these works share. The characters represent the lifestyle of the outcast, the person whom normal society shuns from view or care. While literary journalism represents the characters as victims of oppression, parody emboldens the victimized characters. Parody suspends reality in order to propagate its message; in addition, parody forms a bridge between its text and the original text. In such fashion, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine* represent their characters similarly despite diverging methods.

When contemplating parody, the connection between the original text and the new text is imperative. To explain this connection, Linda Hutcheon conducted research in the work, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. By her analysis, parody's beginning meaning is derived from its parts; "odos" is Latin for song and "para" is Latin for "counter" or "beside" (Hutcheon 32). Thus, a work of parody relates to the original work like a counter song; comparisons made between two literary works fuels parody. The parody propagates similarities in the plot and characters, and through such similarities, the work reaches an understanding with the original work. However, Hutcheon mentions that "parody is a sophisticated genre in the demands it makes on its practitioners and its interpreters. The encoder,

then the decoder, must effect a structural superimposition of texts that incorporates the old into the new. Parody is a bitextual synthesis" (Hutcheon 32-33). Parody creates allusions to the original work with the hopes that the audience pushes the veil aside to encounter the original text. To present the idea through another lens, the original work acts as the skeleton, and the work of parody then enlivens the skeleton by adding the necessary tissue. The original is refreshed and engaged through the parody, which often simplifies and uplifts the original as well. Therefore, parody creates a new and humorous angle from which to reconsider themes consistent with the old text.

Fundamentally, parody exists due to irony and humor. The audience's understanding of a parody rests on acknowledging exaggeration as a humorous effect. As Heidi Moore explains the foundation of parody, "people behave irrationally, committing follies that reveal their essential ignorance and ridiculousness in relation to civilized systems of ethical and social behavior" (Moore 47). Like Steinbeck's comment on making his characters an "over-essence of people," characters of parody exaggerate beyond normal expectations. Living outside the standards, the characters are unjustified in their actions, but this fact makes them more approachable to the audience. They do not threaten or offend, but instead, they entertain using their "ridiculousness." Through unguarded personalities, the characters of parodies develop a relationship with the audience that is not bound by ethics or society. Specifically for the characters of *Little Miss Sunshine*, each character adopts an exaggerated trait or background that does not occur in typical society. Though the behavior excludes them from normal society, the Hoovers delight the audience, shattering expectations of realism or authenticity. However, their lack of realism extends only to their traits; as the movie transpires, their emotional connections as a family unit survive the "ridiculousness" of parody.

Bases of Comparison: Characterization

The most provocative examples of the American Dream's distortions emerge in the study of each work's characters. Both Steinbeck and Arndt create internal conflicts between winning and losing within each character; desires for a house, a family, a book deal, a place in the Air Force Academy, etc. are goals the characters set for themselves. Each conflict resolves with dissolution of the previous goal, and through this, the distortions emerge. Each character faces the bitterness of defeat; for all, the defeat is total, meaning that they perceive no success from their efforts. In the following section, the most critical distortions will be examined through analysis of the characters. Beginning with the characters from *The Grapes of Wrath*, the skeleton of the comparison will be configured. Then, the tissues will be added through analysis of the characters from *Little Miss Sunshine*. To conclude each comparison, the influence of parody will be ascertained because understanding the "bitextual synthesis" remains a vital component of this study. In examining each relationship, the American Dream's distortions will surface.

GoW's Tom and Uncle John & *LMS*'s Uncle Frank

Though *The Grapes of Wrath* commences with an interclary chapter, the character Tom initiates the plot for the specific progression of the Joads. He appears unassuming, and he is characterized indirectly through dialogue with a suspicious trucker with whom he is hitchhiking. He begins a journey, released from prison into an unfamiliar world. Tom describes his crime succinctly as "'homicide'" (Steinbeck 13), and such simplicity defines Tom's personality. Because he has the stigma of a prison sentence—making him fear scarce employment opportunities—Tom returns to his family to work for his father, but his discovery does not meet his expectations. The Joad family has been evicted and replaced with mechanical men, plowing

ten times the amount that what one family can manage. Instead of fighting the situation in Oklahoma, Tom joins their journey to California, a place of opportunity and wealth. As the family transforms from "farm men" to "migrant men" (Steinbeck 196), Tom becomes the head of the family. Though he had not created the plan, his resolve proves most constant while the other men's obduracy withers. He remains unwilling to despair amidst the corporate greed and individualist ethos.

Unlike Tom, Uncle John is characterized by loss and bitterness. As Steinbeck explains, "Nearly all the time the barrier of loneliness cut Uncle John off from people and from appetites" (96). While his young wife was pregnant, she had complained about pain, but he ignored her pain as simply an aching stomach; unfortunately, she died a day later (Steinbeck 69). Continuing into the novel's plot, Uncle John interprets his neglect as "a sin" (Steinbeck 69), and he remains throughout the novel a reminder of loss' impact on a man's perspective. John's admission that "She's [the sin] a-bitin' in my guts" represents his continued struggle with losing his wife (Steinbeck 268). Instead of adjusting to a new lifestyle, Uncle John's perspective remains distorted by the loss of his wife. This exemplifies the tendency toward a polarized vision of winning and losing; the loss of his wife dismantles Uncle John's vision of success irreparably. Nonetheless, he provides the Joads with their original foundation because his house and money fuels the journey's launch. While Tom and Pa wrestle with the larger questions of the journey, Uncle John remains the tertiary male, seemingly idle in comparison.

Combining the traits of both Tom and Uncle John, the character of Uncle Frank in *Little Miss Sunshine* takes form. As *Little Miss Sunshine* opens, the viewer watches a preliminary montage of each character. However, the plot begins with a shot of an isolated and enfeebled Uncle Frank in the hospital. His suicide attempt has failed, and as a result, he must be supervised

at all times (*Little Miss Sunshine* 6:07). Through his release from the hospital, Uncle Frank relates to Tom; both characters are tethered by some constraint (for Tom, prison and for Frank, the hospital) until their emancipations. Their releases serve as precursors to the journeys to California. Moreover, Frank displays similarities to Tom through his ability to motivate and remain optimistic. In the family's struggle to push the car forward, Frank exclaims, "No one gets left behind! No one gets left behind! Outstanding, soldier! Outstanding!" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 32:43). While he had previously struggled, he attempts a positive attitude, for the family's benefit, during a demanding journey.

As previously discussed, Tom and Uncle Frank possess unique similarities, but another dimension exists within Uncle Frank that embodies *The Grapes of Wrath*'s Uncle John. As the primary example, both Uncle John and Uncle Frank experience a life-shattering series of losses. For Uncle Frank, the attempted suicide originates with a relationship gone awry:

> FRANK: The boy that I was in love with fell in love with another man, Larry Sugarman.
>
> SHERYL: Who's Larry Sugarman?
>
> FRANK: Larry Sugarman is perhaps the second-most highly-regarded Proust scholar in the U.S.
>
> RICHARD: Who's number one?
>
> FRANK: That would be me, Rich.
>
> OLIVE: So, that's when.
>
> FRANK: No, what happened was I was a bit upset. So, I said some things that I shouldn't have said, and I did some things that I shouldn't have done, and

> subsequently, I was fired from my job and forced to move out of my apartment and move into a motel.
>
> OLIVE: And that's when you tried to—
>
> FRANK: Well, no. Actually, all of that was okay. What happened was two days ago, the MacArthur Foundation, in its infinite wisdom, awarded a Genius Grant to Larry Sugarman, and that's when. (*Little Miss Sunshine* 14:11-15:01)

The previous conversation alludes to the decomposition of Frank's life due to a loss of love and status. The disaster amounted to a monumental distortion of his purpose and will to live. At one time, Frank had held the esteem of colleagues and the national spotlight for Proust scholarship, but with the removal of that status, Frank no longer desired to live. As the film continues, Frank's bitterness shows that like Uncle John, Frank has not adjusted to the loss of status; he remarks, "I just want everyone to know that I am the pre-eminent Proust scholar in the United States" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 32:02). This comment unveils Frank's distorted view of his previous success. Like Uncle John, Frank lacks the ability to overlook past failure to regain happiness. However, in Frank's monologue about Marcel Proust, he describes how Proust perceives failure; "[Proust] gets down to the end of his life, and he looks back and decides that all those years he suffered, those years were the best years of his life because they made him who he was" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 1:23:29-1:23:38). This quotation shows how Proust (and by extension, Frank) views failure. Instead of seeing failure as the enemy, Frank claims that failure creates man's identity. Failure forms a person's life; therefore, Frank's suffering can be interpreted as his life's best or most formative experience. He retains the memory so obsessively because the loss of status and the loss of love have made him the person he is—a "pre-eminent", post-suicidal man without a path to follow. In terms of the American Dream, Uncle Frank has a

complex relationship with success and failure; though he appears embittered by his loss, he also demonstrates that his loss has strengthened him. This juxtaposition relates to the confusing nature of winning and losing, showing how Uncle Frank does not completely understand how to cope with the issue.

As a combination of two characters from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Uncle Frank holds the purpose of making ridiculous the concepts of leadership and death. Tom's role in the character of Frank is to pose as a would-be leader who has lost direction. Tom's resilience is parodied by scenes in which Frank needlessly aids the family (for example, sprinting ahead to sign into the competition [*Little Miss Sunshine* 1:13:33]). With regard to the parody of Uncle John, Frank's loss of will compares to Uncle John's, but the tone of parody appears when the man who steals his lover is ironically also the man who steals his professional prominence. The characters from *The Grapes of Wrath* interweave to guide Frank's formation, and the added layers of parody foment Frank's authenticity within *Little Miss Sunshine*.

GoW's Pa & *LMS*'s Richard

In contrast to Tom's resilient leadership, Pa in *The Grapes of Wrath* projects only the appearance of patriarchy. However, the novel's progression reveals his lack of initiative. The initial example of his hesitation appears when Tom arrives at Uncle John's home; Steinbeck writes, "At last he touched Tom, but touched him on the shoulder, timidly, and instantly took his hand away" (72). The quotation exhibits Pa's conflicted patriarchy (while also portraying the traditional relationship between fathers and sons during the 1930s). Though he understands his place as the leader of the home, he uncertainly welcomes Tom, his wayward son who has returned. To understand why Pa acts this way, one must view the contextual surroundings. Pa's

displacement from his farm (both home and work) causes his ineffectual nature with his family. Because the land supplied food, money, and a future, losing the land deteriorates family's standard of living. It appears that Pa's perception of family is linked to his perception of his worth; when he loses the livelihood, it translates to a loss of connection to family as well. In the government camp, a camp where the Joads find temporary respite, Pa remains asleep with the children and Uncle John while Ma sets up camp and Tom secures a job (Steinbeck 302). This situation demonstrates that Pa's will to lead the family no longer exists; the land had been his backbone, and with it ripped away from him, he does not possess the strength to hold the family together. What this fact demonstrates is a polarized perspective on success; if Pa does not succeed with his work, he feels he cannot succeed with family either.

Richard in *Little Miss Sunshine* undergoes a similar hesitance toward family and loss of initiative. Like Pa's reaction to Tom, Richard welcomes Frank to the house peculiarly. After Frank returns from attempted suicide, Richard greeted him with a handshake and "Hey! Good to—see you" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 10:06). He conveys little empathy for Frank's condition; then, he abandons Frank at the table to search for his daughter Olive. Richard's emotional distance from Frank is an example of his conflicted role in the family. For a different reason than Pa, Richard extracts himself from the mediocrity of his family. However, the failure of Richard's "Nine Steps to Success" book deal complicates his role further as the patriarch. When questioned by his wife Sheryl about his book deal, he demands that she leave the matter to him (*Little Miss Sunshine* 8:15), but ultimately, her doubt undermines his authority. He does not appear to have the respect of any member of the family throughout the movie, and his place as the leader is questionable because of this factor. When he inevitably loses the book deal, he relinquishes any power that he previously had, and he resigns himself to the idea of bankruptcy. Like Pa,

Richard's lack of successes further distances him from his family. Because he cannot provide for them, he sees himself as a failure, and he seems to step away from his family. While he had once been a proponent of positive thinking, losing the book deal distorts his self-esteem and relationship with his family.

Similarly to Frank, the character of Richard contains several elements of parody, which highlight a humorous approach to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Primarily, Richard's book deal involves irony because the program's goal is to promote success, yet he fails to launch it beyond a sparsely-attended classroom presentation (*Little Miss Sunshine* 2:21). He outlines strategies by which to reach one's dreams, but in attempting to receive publication for those strategies, he proves they are inherently flawed. His dream of becoming a successful public speaker dissolves due to his anonymity, proving that success does not come effortlessly. Furthermore, Richard exemplifies parody when he rides a motorized bicycle down the freeway, desperately tracking down his agent, Stan Grossman (*Little Miss Sunshine* 47:39). The element of parody in this example involves the juxtaposition between his purposeful determination and his whimsical transportation. Through both of these examples, Richard is perceived as a floundering amateur when confidence and strength prove to be his goal. Consequently, Richard lightheartedly mocks patriarchy in similar fashion that Pa falls short of patriarchy's ideals.

GoW's Granpa and Granma & *LMS*'s Grandpa

For the purpose of explaining Granma and Granpa from *The Grapes of Wrath*, these two characters combine to form a thematic representation. While they possess individual characteristics that distinguish them from each other, Granma and Grampa illustrate together the evanescence of the farm lifestyle. They are the oldest living generation that toiled over the land;

because of this, they symbolize life on the farm. They reside in the barn instead of the house for health reasons (Steinbeck 75), but the underlying symbolism relates that Grampa and Granma remain primarily attached to the farm while the rest of the family sleeps in the house. Separating the grandparents from the family signifies a breach between the past and the present; this breach is formalized by the grandparents' deaths. Because Grampa argues vehemently against leaving, he stays symbolically closest to the farm. In his final moments, Grampa diverges from his typical ornery self; as Steinbeck elucidates, "Without warning Grampa began to cry. His chin wavered and his old lips tightened over his mouth and he sobbed hoarsely" (136). His death occurs shortly after this instance; however, the quotation conveys more than a stroke victim's lack of lucidity. Symbolically, Grampa mourns the dissolution of his life's work. As they drive further from his fields in Oklahoma, the loss of his land becomes more permanent. To symbolize this most succinctly, the family buries Grampa in Oklahoma—still within the state that he calls home. The loss of success on his Oklahoma farm, both physically and figuratively, ends Grampa's life, displaying the corrosive effects of distorting one's perspectives.

Corresponding to Grampa's passing, Granma expires on the night drive that ushers them into California. Though her sickness begins soon after Grampa's death, she fights until they reach the sprawling splendor of California. As Steinbeck narrates:

> Ma looked down at her hands, lying together like tired lovers in her lap. "I wisht I could wait an' not tell you. I wisht it could be all—nice."
>
> Pa said, "Then Granma's bad."
>
> Ma raised her eyes and looked over the valley. "Granma's dead." (Steinbeck 228)

Where Granpa's death marked the beginning of the journey, the excerpt expresses Granma's death as the final juncture. They arrive in California, meaning that their farming life has

concluded. Consequently, Granma serves as the symbol of that end. Like the description of Ma's hands in the previous quotation, Grampa and Granma Joad resemble the exhausted Oklahoma lifestyle, and their deaths show how the past cannot function in the present. Relating to the theme of winning and losing, both deaths expand the theme by showing the polarization between the two lifestyles. Both representatives of the Oklahoma lifestyle expire before fully embracing the new California lifestyle, which signifies the division between the two. As Oklahoma resembles the losing portion, because they lost their farm and livelihood, both Grampa and Granma remain with the failure of the past. Metaphorically, their deaths represent the inability to adjust to the possibility of success in the future.

In *Little Miss Sunshine*, the character of Grandpa passes away for a similar purpose. He possesses a bellicose personality, and he ignores societal pressures to conform. As a result, he uses heroin openly, which causes his eviction from his retirement home. Unlike the Joad grandparents, Grandpa Hoover's symbolic role is more esoteric; he symbolizes the proud deviation from the norm. In a motivational talk with Olive, Grandpa declares, "You know what a loser is? A real loser is somebody that's so afraid of not winning, they don't even try" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 45:29). Through the previous quotation, Grandpa evokes a salient theme—winning is defined by effort, not by medals or crowns. The quotation exemplifies how Grandpa differs from Richard and Frank; both perceive success as clearly divided between winning and losing. Grandpa understands that Olive is a winner simply by expressing herself. He adds that at the pageant they should "tell 'em all to go to Hell" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 45:50), transmitting a position of proud deviancy. However, as the morning of the pageant dawns, Grandpa has passed. Grandpa's death foreshadows that the pageant is not a place where deviation from the norm is allowed. Because he antagonizes the typical lifestyle, Grandpa's death signals entrance into a

domain of behavioral restriction. Along with the Joad grandparents, Grandpa Hoover dies to represent the final stage of a transition. For the Hoovers, the transition signifies one from proud deviancy to confused restriction.

As heroin abuse suggests, parody surrounds the character of Grandpa in *Little Miss Sunshine*. He adds humor to the film through his advice to Dwayne, contradicting the conservative grandfather figure: "This is the voice of experience talking; are you listening? [Have sex with] a lot of women, Dwayne. Not just one woman, a lot of women" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 23:20). While this passage may seem vulgar, its purpose is to bring humor and irony to a stock character (of the grandfather), usually regarded as rigid and conservative. He contradicts the reasonable grandfather that an audience expects. Moreover, he heightens the belligerence found in Granpa and Granma from *The Grapes of Wrath*, proposing that old age involves the deterioration of societal expectations in a similar vein to Granpa's refusal to button his pants (Steinbeck 77). To confirm further the hilarity associated with Grandpa, Richard decides to smuggle Grandpa's body out of the hospital, claiming that "If there's one thing my father would have wanted, it's to see Olive perform in the "Little Miss Sunshine" pageant. Now, I believe we'd be doing a grave disservice to his memory if we were to just give up now!" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 57:47-57:58). Knowing Grandpa Hoover's passion for Olive, Richard advocates disregarding the hospital rules in order to honor Grandpa's wishes. While sentimental, the plan creates a ridiculous scene in which Grandpa's body flails out of a hospital window, ripping the sheet in which he is wrapped. Then, the family cradles him through the parking lot and folds him into the van in a flustered heist. The scene outlines that like Grandpa's life, there is proud deviation from the norm in Grandpa's death.

GoW's Noah and Al & *LMS*'s Dwayne

To continue comparisons, *The Grapes of Wrath* characters Noah and Al combine to create the dynamic character in *Little Miss Sunshine*, Dwayne. Though Noah possesses nominal significance in the novel, he bears heavily on the theme of loyalty to family. He refutes the connections to family that other characters in the novel find valuable. In Steinbeck's description, "Noah [was] the first-born, tall and strange, walking always with a wondering look on his face, calm and puzzled. He had never been angry in his life. He looked in wonder at angry people, wonder and uneasiness, as normal people look at the insane" (78). Steinbeck characterizes him as the willing outcast, the person confused by ordinary interactions or emotions. Further along in the plot, Noah completes his role as outcast by leaving the family to live by the Colorado River. This act conveys a realization that the river provides deeper meaning to Noah than does his family. He departs because "the folks are nice to [him]. But they don't really care for [him]" (Steinbeck 209). While the decision angers Tom, he does not follow or coerce Noah to stay. As the intentionally distant character in the novel, Noah needs nothing more than a river to subsist. With regard to the theme of winning and losing, Noah desires neither success nor failure. Because of his apathy, Noah acts as the opposition to ambition. What one can learn from Noah is what results from losing meaningful connections to family. Instead of valuing family, Noah values isolation and idleness. Through this conclusion, Noah opposes success, failure, and family, portraying the opposite of what should occur in the human experience.

Contrasting Noah's idle lifestyle, Al Joad asserts himself as the rising leader of the family, providing for the family through his knowledge of automobiles. Despite being only a teenager, Al adopts the responsibility of an adult. As Steinbeck asserts:

> [Al] might be a musking goat sometimes, but this was his responsibility, this truck, its running, and its maintenance. If something went wrong it would be his fault, and while no one would say it, everyone, and Al most of all, would know it was his fault. And so he felt it, watched it, and listened to it. […] Even Pa, who was the leader, would hold a wrench and take orders from Al. (Steinbeck 97)

The previous quotation propagates Al's status as a boy desiring manhood. He understands his responsibility as the mechanic of the family, but he appears obsessively focused on his performance. Feeling, watching, and listening to the car demonstrates Al's compulsion for success. The crisis catches Al in the vulnerable stage of boyhood and adulthood, and his response is to assume adult status prematurely. This premature adulthood appears later in the novel when he becomes engaged to Aggie Wainwright, claiming "we figgers to get married, an' I'm gonna git a job in a garage, an' we'll have a rent' house for a while" (Steinbeck 424). At only sixteen years old, Al desires marriage and a full-time job. The quotation shows Al cannot escape his internal struggle with age and responsibility. While Pa, Ma, Rose of Sharon, Ruthie, and Winfield appear helpless in the boxcar, Al plans a life with his fiancée in which abject poverty has no place. With no identifiable means, Al asserts his independence from his family. Thus, Al's characterization shows that he distorts his age and status habitually, adopting responsibility in order to obtain success prematurely.

The film *Little Miss Sunshine* blends the characterization of Noah and Al to form Dwayne, a complex and dynamic character within the movie. The film's first glimpse of Dwayne shows him performing several exercises and marking a day off an expansive list (*Little Miss Sunshine* 2:30-2:55). Both his exercises and his list express Dwayne's compulsion over what the audience later learns is to attend the Air Force Academy; furthermore, the compulsion deepens

when Frank discovers that Dwayne has taken a vow of silence. In order to achieve his goal, Dwayne makes an unfeasible, obsessive sacrifice that defines his character. Thus, the comparison to Al takes form; Dwayne is characterized primarily by his vow of silence, which adheres him to the goal of flying. However, Dwayne also cleaves himself from the family like Noah in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In a note written to his family, Dwayne exclaims, "This is unfair! All I ask is that you leave me alone!" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 19:44-19:58). While the note may characterize the typical teenager, the note is followed by continual rejection of the family that has supported him. When he discovers that he is color blind (disabling him from a pilot's license), he attempts to leave the Hoover family in a way that corresponds to Noah's departure. While overcome with despair, he shouts:

> SHERYL: Dwayne, for better or worse, we're your family.
>
> DWAYNE: No, you're not my family! Okay, I don't want to be your family! I hate you […] people! I hate you! Divorce? Bankrupt? Suicide? You're […] losers! You're losers! No, please just leave me here, Mom. Please. (*Little Miss Sunshine* 1:08:45-1:09:13)

The passage relays Dwayne's genuine contempt for his family. Though anger has exacerbated his thoughts, the loss of Dwayne's goal destroys any desire for attachment. He wishes to remain alone in a field like Noah wishes to remain by the Colorado River. His anti-familial characteristics foment the comparison between himself and Noah, but his decision to rejoin his family circles back on the comparison with Al. Ultimately, his innocent half-sister Olive persuades him by laying her head on his shoulder (*Little Miss Sunshine* 1:10:45). The moment encapsulates the comparison between Al and Dwayne; Dwayne realizes that it is his responsibility, as a brother, to provide for Olive the opportunity to succeed. Reluctantly, he picks

himself up in order to help Olive with her dream. Like Al, Dwayne's motivation resides in his responsibility to his family, despite his animosity. Though Dwayne's characterization proves complex, both Noah and Al inspire his character. Dwayne, like Noah and Al, contains distortions in his perception of his worth when he fails; the loss of his goal (flight school) provokes his desire to remain isolated in a field, denoting a loss of will to continue. Thus, like many other character in these works, Dwayne sees success and failure as divided completely, and he sees himself as worthless when failure occurs.

As with each character from *Little Miss Sunshine*, Dwayne conveys parody in his characterization. The principal means through which Dwayne foments parody is his vow of silence; this decision includes irony due to his notepad, which continues his communication. While the goal of the vow is to sacrifice speech, Dwayne essentially does not sacrifice it, and instead, he draws more attention to himself through using the notepad. Thus, the vow becomes more ridiculous than admirable. In addition, Dwayne disbands his vow, and his first vocal communication is a deafening enunciation of profanity (*Little Miss Sunshine* 1:07:36). Realizing that he is color blind leads Dwayne into an unprecedented display of rage. In such a harmless activity, Olive's haphazard color blindness test, a life-altering discovery occurs that causes Dwayne's meltdown. How Dwayne becomes aware is essentially ironic; the audience expects the test to be simply a pastime for Olive when, in fact, the test severs Dwayne's future in the Air Force Academy. The dramatic reversal of expectations verges on the ridiculous until Dwayne's sincere despair appears, causing a change in the scene's tone. Despite his earnest misery in losing his dream, overall, Dwayne fulfills his role as a character of parody in *Little Miss Sunshine*.

GoW's Rose of Sharon & *LMS*'s Olive

In a unique fashion, Rose of Sharon from *The Grapes of Wrath* and Olive from *Little Miss Sunshine* form the final significant character comparison. As the journey to California commences, Rose of Sharon's pregnancy appears as the most significant trait her character holds. As Steinbeck alludes, she is "pregnant and careful. Her hair, braided and wrapped around her head, made an ash-blond crown" (Steinbeck 95). Through this description, Steinbeck indicates that Rose of Sharon thinks of herself highly. The reference to a "crown" suggests that Rose of Sharon expects royal treatment, and the novel's progression confirms this anticipation. In a further evocation of her character, Steinbeck writes, "She was pleased with herself, and she complained about things that didn't really matter. And she demanded services of Connie that were silly" (129). In this quotation, Rose of Sharon neglects the surrounding chaos, choosing to focus on her needs alone. Her pregnancy blinds her to the barren outlook for her family; until Connie departs, she denies that the future looks ominous. However, his departure engenders in Rose of Sharon an altered perspective; she realizes the impending desperation of raising a child without a father. Moreover, Rose of Sharon's character demonstrates the deterioration of a future's promise; the loss of her child signals the ultimate cessation of hope for the Joads' new life in California. Steinbeck agonizingly explains, "On a newspaper lay a blue shriveled little mummy" (Steinbeck 443-444). The previous quotation bespeaks the miscarriage of Rose of Sharon's baby, but symbolically, the miscarriage represents the conclusive realization of the Joads' destitution. Amidst a terrorizing flood, which debilitates their automobile, the Joads confront the misery of loss once again. Ma equivocates that no blame can be allotted, but the mood in the boxcar points to resentment for their dire circumstances. Although Rose of Sharon belies an unmerited self-importance throughout the novel, her pregnancy symbolizes a grandiose

hope the Joads have for the future. As the pregnancy's disastrous end implies, their hope in the future ceases with the baby Rose of Sharon hoped to raise.

In her petulance and her grandiose dreams, Olive Hoover's characterization is relatable to that of Rose of Sharon. The film's first scene establishes Olive's obsession with pageantry; she watches and re-watches a contestant being crowned while she practices her victory wave (*Little Miss Sunshine* 1:29). Then, when told she has won the Regional Little Miss Sunshine contest, her response is an earsplitting scream (*Little Miss Sunshine* 16:50). Both these instances relate Olive's youthful approach to dreams, but the latter example specifically correlates to Rose of Sharon. Like Rose of Sharon, Olive ignores her surroundings (especially her placement indoors) and focuses on her emotions. Because she is only seven years old, Olive's self-absorption seems reasonable. However, like Rose of Sharon's pregnancy, the pageant becomes the fulcrum on which the other characters rely. Each crisis abates in order to pursue Olive's goal; however, in comparison to fighting bankruptcy and rehabilitating from suicide, Olive succeeding at the pageant carries the least importance. Instead of concentrating on those two previous crises, the family utilizes the pageant as an escape, relying on Olive's success to negate their own failure. The pageant, as foreshadowed throughout the film, is a display of hilarious excess and the adulteration of innocence. Olive stands alone, whitened by the spotlight while plasticized, doll-like children strut beside her; her worried, sullen face discloses silently that she does not belong. As the pageant continues, her ego's destruction correlates to Rose of Sharon's miscarriage. With a less gruesome result, Olive loses the hope of crowning glory as Little Miss Sunshine. Similarly to Rose of Sharon's self-important expectations and the loss of her baby, engrossment with the pageant and Olive's thorough failure display the journey's distorted purpose and forlorn conclusion.

Parody finds its peak in the character of Olive from *Little Miss Sunshine*, utilizing the pageant as the ultimate carnival. Nonetheless, Olive's appearance and attire mark the presence of parody succinctly. The obvious beauty queen incorporates charm, fitness, and cleanliness into one, neat package; despite this expectation, Olive resembles a normal child, donning over-sized glasses, a long, unkempt ponytail, and unseemly apparel. Additionally, her chunky, yet natural baby weight contradicts the trim standard of pageant winners. Therefore, the idea of Olive as a pageant queen proves ironic and humorous. When she arrives at Redondo Beach, swarms of over-exposed children in sequin-strangled costumes appear. Those same children grace the stage in tall hair and bright bikinis as the song "Catwalkin'" plays in the background. Their sexualized demeanors and clothing challenge the ideals of childhood, and by comparison, Olive looks modest and unassuming. However, when Olive performs her talent routine, the crowd chastises her overtly sexual dancing regardless of their own daughters' implied sexualized natures. Consequently, a paradox forms between denouncing something inappropriate when demonstrated explicitly and applauding something inappropriate when conveyed implicitly. The impact left on the audience is the hypocrisy between the in-group of pageantry and the out-group, which in this case proves the Hoovers. To nourish the role of humor in the film, the pageant scenes emphasize this hypocrisy, yet Olive and the Hoovers substantiate the qualms involved in pageantry, including its distortion of childhood and success.

Shared Conclusive Element

Though the following does not compare characters exactly, the shared conclusive element of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine* establishes the most prominent theme of the two works. In the middle of a flood that destroys the automobile completely, the Joads relinquish

their hope and control and take shelter in a forsaken barn. Their time in California has led to death, disunity, and disappointment, not meeting any expectations with which the Joads had started their journey. Similarly, the arrival in Redondo Beach for the pageant is met with further failure of the microbus' brakes and right sliding door. The pageant annihilates Olive's self-worth while simultaneously ostracizing the Hoovers by association. In no way do the families' prospects appear optimistic.

Suddenly, the mood of the works alters. Both sets of characters reach a critical point at which they can wither in fragments or they can weld together what adversity has shattered. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Rose of Sharon elects to feed a complete stranger, who is starving to death, by offering her breast milk. The act ushers the dying man and his son into the Joad family, much like the Wilsons and the Wainwrights had been ushered in previously. The scene proclaims the desire to unify even in the most despondent moments. Likewise, Olive's family in *Little Miss Sunshine* rejects the crowd's negativity by joining Olive in her sexualized talent routine. Effectively ruining the pageant, the Hoovers frolic and dance in a celebration of their unique and beautiful family. They offer to each other the affirmation that family triumphs over society, and loyalty supersedes success. Both works evaluate what it means to win in these scenes. Though neither family can claim success by societal standards, both can claim adherence to family. What winning means for these works is the ability to stand beside one's brethren, proudly accepting bigotry, disapproval, and loss.

Simply put, remaining loyal to one's family proves the keystone to *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. This shared conclusive element highlights the ways in which each family overcomes the obstacles that appear to block their passage. When moving beyond the two works and into the current dilemmas, the idea of remaining loyal to one's family expands. The

idea of family indicates a sense of community; instead of isolating oneself and regarding the future as an individualistic affair, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine* instruct that humanity is a collective, brought together by common goals and aspirations. In the recent economic recession, the 2008 political campaign, and post-collegiate unemployment, collectivism and individualism appear polarized in terms of public opinion. Through each issue, collectivism proves the more effective means by which to succeed. In the following section, the paper will demonstrate how adjustments can be made, using the conclusions discussed in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine*—maintaining loyalty and community.

Relating to the Current Moment

In addition to expanding the knowledge about adaptation, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Little Miss Sunshine,* this project aims to create a context for which the American Dream can be re-evaluated. Through each character above, the distortions of success and failure become evident. The characters refuse to acknowledge partiality in success and failure; they lose absolutely, instead of accepting the effort as success. In a similar fashion, the economic, social, and politic arenas exhibit individualism and pessimistic standards when approaching winning and losing. By using the theme of these two artistic forms, an optimistic argument about success and failure forms. Utilizing the theme of loyalty to family (however a person defines that term), the normal society can adapt to engage in more harmonious, empowering interactions.

As the worst recession since the 1930s, the 2008 economic recession is a pivotal example of the distortion of the American Dream. It began in the corrupt practices of banking executives who focused their attention on the short-term success of their banks because they were promised higher salaries and bonuses in exchange. As Christopher Keller and Michael Stocker of *The*

National Law Journal explain, “preoccupation with short-term results at the cost of long-term success was in large part due to the nature of the compensation packages being offered to management, particularly excessive payments to corporate executives to meet short-term and "low-aspirational" targets” (Keller). The quotation confirms that an individualistic motivation in part caused the financial crisis; like the landowners, bankers, and pageant mothers, the executives made decisions based on their ability to gain. When the economic recession occurred, the banks’ procedures were viewed as the culprit, but behind those procedures lurked another culprit, the selfish impetus to make more money by cheating the system.

Consequently, the financial crisis has created a Joad and Hoover family on a national level, with families losing their homes and livelihood while others postpone or are denied their future possibilities due to loss of money. Like the financial crisis, the economic recession has displayed the impropriety of decision-making based on profits for the few. While companies contracted yet maintained their margins of profit, lower- and middle-class workers received lower wages and less availability for work. Lawrence Mishel of the Economic Policy Institute declares that “…there has been persistent high unemployment as households reduced debt and scaled back purchases. The consequence for wages has been substantially slower growth across the board” (Cooper). Though many households have found means to avoid bankruptcy, as the Mishel quotation suggests, the high unemployment has caused significant reductions in wages’ ability to grow. In relation to the two works, one recalls the lowering of Tom’s wages from thirty to twenty five cents (Steinbeck 295), and one also recalls the inability for Richard to procure his book deal. Both occurrences link back to the economic deficiency of the respective eras, showing how economic stagnation places limitations on the American Dream. The recession diminished

the growth of the nation's wealth while simultaneously limiting the standard of living of its citizens.

Amidst the negative surroundings the recession created, one factor signifies that the American people have retained their sense of community and charity. Though one might expect charitable giving to decline as a result of lessening available funds, a brief by Rob Reich and Christopher Wimer of Stanford University promulgates that the opposite may prove to be true. They articulate that while funds did decline between 2007 and 2010, "Americans might be giving just as much of their income, proportionally, as they did before" (Reich 2). Furthermore, data that Reich and Wimer collected about contributions to food banks indicates that "the surge of charitable giving to food banks suggests that some Americans are responding generously to the increased need brought about by economic distress" (Reich 4). Both quotations convey that Americans' supporting other Americans did not necessarily wane during the recession. Americans targeted food banks as a means of donating, knowing the increased need those entities would experience. The American people resorted to collectivism (giving the group priority over the individuals) when faced with crisis. Thus, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine* foment an idea that has benefited millions of families across the United States, but of course, progress and increased charity needs to occur.

The economic recession impacted many groups, but in particular, the effect the recession had on youth unemployment remains problematic today. In an article over the retirement age debate, Jeanne Sahadi explains, "Today, the so-called normal or full retirement age is 66, up from 65 a decade ago. It is scheduled to increase by two months a year starting in 2017 until it reaches 67 in 2022. Meanwhile, 62 remains the age at which those who retire early can collect a percentage of their full benefits" (Sahadi). The previous quotation identifies the job market

dilemma of longer life expectancies. When the retirement age is extended, the job turnover rate decreases. A plurality of college graduates enter the workforce annually, only to be underemployed or without work. These people, called NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training), represent 14.8% of American youth according to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (Gumbel). What might have led to a loss of faith in the education sector has surprisingly resulted in a re-evaluation of careers and the meaning of college. In 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that "high-school graduates enrolled in college rose to 70.1 percent" (Leonhardt). What this quotation proves is that economic recessions do not deter the benefits of education, but rather, recessions incentivize students to seek better opportunities.

The majority of college students enter traditional four-year programs, but in the past half-decade, the amount of community-college enrollment has risen, which serves the populations that most acutely felt the recession itself. With lower tuition costs and flexible class schedules, the community college atmosphere provides attainment of a goal without sacrificing resources that often do not exist for the student. The administration and faculty of community colleges design curriculum to profit the students in finding reliable employment after graduation; instead of regarding the student as a commodity from which to gain, community colleges work with students to empower them. As William Doyle and Alexander Gorbunov explain, community colleges act as "part of a democratization and expansion in opportunity" (Doyle 3). They supply those of lesser means with the ability to change their future. The collective stride toward improved access for education correlates directly with the conclusions of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. Instead of designing programs meant to exclude the fringe and outcast members of academia, community colleges offer second chances and empowerment; this relates to the exigency of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, both which implored the

audience to reject individualism and greed. Instead of allocating higher education for the upper echelon of society, community colleges extend and include any class that is willing. Though post-collegiate unemployment is endemic for college students, the increase of community college enrollment and subsequent employment shows that collective, community efforts in education should be encouraged.

Finally, the 2008 political campaign chronicled the victory of collectivism over individualism. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, Barack Obama proclaimed:

> What is that American promise? It's a promise that says each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will, but that we also have obligations to treat each other with dignity and respect. […] Our government should work for us, not against us. It should help us, not hurt us. It should ensure opportunity not just for those with the most money and influence, but for every American who's willing to work. That's the promise of America, the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation, the fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper. (Obama 16:50-18:16)

Speaking directly of the American dream, Obama demonstrates that government's role is to work for the collective good. He recognizes the idea of "general welfare," which arises in the preamble to the Constitution. Countering the idea that government limits freedom, he establishes that the people of a nation "rise or fall" together, signifying national success or failure. Instead of isolation, he promotes communal responsibility based on "dignity and respect." These stances represent the Democratic Party, but his policies expand the stances further. For instance, his vision for healthcare reform created a system in which chronically ill patients found relief from

rejection by private insurance companies. Their futures were altered positively because Obama propagates the notion that every American deserves healthcare. Though he advocates for higher taxes, which may be viewed as a limit on success, he proposes programs which empower those with the least resources. His idea of success rests on every one living better, not a few living the best. For this reason, President Obama aligns with the conclusions of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine* by choosing to fight for the communal interests and the needs of those who face adversity.

Conclusion

At its most fundamental level, the comparison between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine* explores American values. The historical context of *The Grapes of Wrath* outlines the ways in which the government and private aid organizations evaded the Okies' plight; in this, the American position has historically been one of individualism. The novel implores, however, that government and private institutions awaken to the reality that humanity is not an individual experience; those suffering from the atrocious conditions do not differ from those causing the conditions, but instead, they should be viewed as one community. As the reception of the novel suggested, Steinbeck's assertion that humanity is one community was received favorably by many Americans. Likewise, *Little Miss Sunshine* transpires in a context of the diminishing role of the "nuclear family," and the increasing frequency of divorce. Multi-generational homes connect these two works, seeing that the necessity for them has grown in the new millennium. The Hoovers' economic outlook proves bleak, which mirrors the national economy of 2008; because of the September 11th attacks, the U.S. experienced a minor recession, making jobs and

business opportunities less prevalent. In both contexts, the works contrast the families with a world intent on individual gain.

The different modes of representation create unique approaches to the same issue. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the mode of literary journalism presents the Joads as more than just the average family of Oklahoma; they become the metaphor for the migrant population, which suffers as a result of society's neglect. During his time with the migrants and with Route 66, John Steinbeck documents the conditions, and *The Grapes of Wrath* highlights the injustices of those conditions. Unlike the novel, *Little Miss Sunshine* focuses on hilarity and ridiculousness through the mode of parody. By stripping the characters of normalcy, *Little Miss Sunshine* creates a less realistic, but more accessible narrative. The audience does not expect the characters to act in conventional fashion, and that allows the audience to receive their actions less judgmentally. However, *Little Miss Sunshine* does not abandon a message; underneath the mode of parody, the message lies—success, defined by winning or losing, does not apply to the Hoovers and should not apply to anyone.

Comparing the sets of characters confirms the notion that *Little Miss Sunshine* adapts *The Grapes of Wrath*. Additionally, the plot intersections denote the adaptive qualities of *Little Miss Sunshine*, but the cardinal comparison proves the shared conclusive element. In both works' final scenes, the characters affirm their unity by reaching out to those in need. *The Grapes of Wrath* culminates in feeding a sick and dying stranger in the most tender fashion; likewise, *Little Miss Sunshine* concludes with the Hoovers rushing the pageant stage to save Olive from bitter rejection by the crowd. In both works, earnest regard for those needing affirmation concludes the plot. Because of this conclusion, it becomes evident that both Steinbeck and Arndt propose that humanity should resort to communal gain despite individualism's temptations.

That proposal applies to the current era impactfully. The 2008 economic recession seems rooted in the failure of individualism, but through communal efforts, the economy rebounded. With regard to post-collegiate unemployment, what appears to be effective is the surge in community colleges, which provide education to those most acutely suffering from the recession. Above these, as described by President Obama in the 2008 campaign, the national success should promote success for all instead of luxury for the individualistic few. He promotes the American Dream as the solidarity of all Americans for all Americans. Furthering the sense of community, he promotes policies that include those excluded in the private market. Explaining each issue of the current moment uncovers the message contained in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. Success is determined by loyalty and resilience, not by winning or losing.

From these current issues, one needs now to look to the future. These artistic works present a call to end the brutal effects of poverty and of stigmatization. Thus, the definition of success needs a new definition. Based on these works, success means realizing unity, creating a desire in people to help each other, and appreciating the values and contributions of each person. Winning isn't just about money or power, and losing isn't about the absence of those two things. Winning should be about finding one's family at the end of the day and holding them close; winning should be about creating a legacy of giving rather than taking; winning should be about a person's effort and perseverance. The only definition for losing should be the disregard for what's important to humanity—family, community, and compassion.

Works Cited

Angoff, Charles. "In the Great Tradition." *The North American Review* 247.2 (1939): 387-89. Print.

"Box Office Summary for Little Miss Sunshine." *Rotten Tomatoes*. IGN Entertainment, Inc., 2008. Web. 22 Mar. 2013. <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/little_miss_sunshine/numbers.php>.

"The Changing American Family." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 May 2001. Web. 23 Mar. 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/18/opinion/the-changing-american-family.html>.

Cook, Benjamin I., Ron L. Miller, and Richard Seager. "Amplification of the North American "Dust Bowl" Drought through Human-Induced Land Degradation." Ed. James E. Hansen. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106.13 (2009): 4997-5001. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Feb. 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40455137 .>.

Cooper, Michael, Robbie Brown, Malia Wollan, and Ian Lovett. "Lost in Recession, Toll on Underemployed and Underpaid." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 June 2012. Web. 02 Apr. 2013.

Doyle, William R., and Alexander V. Gorbunov. *The Growth of Community Colleges in the American States: An Application of Count Models to Institutional Growth*. Vanderbilt University, 20 Sept. 2007. Web. 2 Apr. 2013. <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lpo/doyle/ccgrowth.pdf>.

Emerson, Jim. "Little Miss Sunshine." *Roger Ebert*. Chicago Sun-Times, 4 Aug. 2006. Web. 27 Mar. 2013.

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060803/REVIEWS/60724005>.

Green, Penelope. "The New York Times." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 30 Nov. 2012. Web. 23 Mar. 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/30/us/building-homes-for-modern-multigenerational-families.html>.

Gumbel, Peter. "Why the U.S. Has a Worse Youth Unemployment Problem than Europe." *Business & Money*. Time Magazine, 5 Nov. 2012. Web. 02 Apr. 2013.

Howarth, William. "The Mother of Literature: Journalism and the Grapes of Wrath." *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Norman Sims. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2008. 53-81. Print.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985. Print.

Keller, Christopher, and Michael Stocker. "Executive Compensation's Role in the Financial Crisis." *Corporate Counsel*. The National Law Journal, 18 Nov. 2008. Web. 02 Apr. 2013.

Landis, Michele L. "Fate, Responsibility, and Natural Disaster Relief: Narrating the American Welfare State." *Law & Society Review* 33.2 (1999): 257-318. Print.

Leonhardt, David. "Students of the Great Recession." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 07 May 2010. Web. 02 Apr. 2013.

Little Miss Sunshine. Dir. Jonathon Dayton and Valerie Faris. By Michael Arndt. Perf. Steve Carell, Toni Collette, and Greg Kinnear. Fox Searchlight Films, 2006. DVD.

Moore, Heidi. "The Aesthetics of Place and the Comedy of Discomfort: Six Humorists." Diss. Union Institute & University, 2007. Print.

Obama, Barack. *Barack Obama at the 2008 DNC*. Denver, Colorado, 28 Aug. 2008. *Youtube*. 29 Aug. 2008. Web. 2 Apr. 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=kv8eiDvrHJ4#!>.

Reich, Rob, and Christopher Wimer. *Charitable Giving and the Great Recession*. Issue brief. Stanford: Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2012. Print.

Sahadi, Jeanne. "The Red-Hot Debate over Raising the Retirement Age." *CNN Money*. Cable News Network, 02 Aug. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2013. <http://money.cnn.com/2010/08/02/news/economy/>.

Shockley, Martin S. "The Reception of the Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma." *American Literature* 15.4 (1944): 351-61. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. Centennial ed. New York: Penguin Group, 2002. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath, 1938-1941*. Ed. Robert J. DeMott. New York: Viking, 1989. Print.

Steinbeck, John, and Robert Wallsten. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. Ed. Elaine Steinbeck. New York: Penguin Group, 1976. Print.

Stevenson, Richard W. "Treasury Chief Sees an Economic Brightening." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 26 Nov. 2001. Web. 23 Mar. 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/26/us/treasury-chief-sees-an-economic-brightening.html?src=pm>.